

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN THE
PROBLEM OF AGING

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Religion

by
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June 1975

This dissertation, written by

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Theology at Claremont in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of*

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Isolation, loneliness, despair are words most commonly used to describe the aging person in 1975. Has the condition of aging always been thus described? Why is it so today? How can it change? What is the role of the church in changing the situation? The almost desperate situation of the aging and the questions this raises for the church are the subject of this dissertation.

The problem of aging is different in technocratic society. In pre-modern times there was a place of honor and respect for the aged. The aged were valued for their wisdom and functioned as containers of wisdom. In technocratic society, however, that which is useful has utmost value. The aged have passed their peak of efficiency and are considered "useless." The subtle, unconscious acceptance of this value system by the aged makes today's problem of aging peculiarly distressing.

Since the value system supporting technocratic society emerged as industrialized society developed, it should be considered a historical phenomenon rather than a natural necessity. As a historical phenomenon there is hope that the underlying dynamics of the problem can be changed.

Following the introduction, the second chapter shows the status of aged persons in biblical times and points to the later shift in care for the aged from extended families to institutions. In Chapter III the modern theories of work with the aged (activity theory and disengagement theory) are reviewed, and it is concluded that neither is adequate to deal with the depth of the current problem.

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In Chapter IV the pertinent physiological and psychological information from gerontology is presented. This information helps us understand the distinction between pathological and normal aging. It also serves as a criterion for distinguishing between natural necessity and historical phenomena as we confront problems of aging.

The unique contribution of theology is explored in Chapter V. The nature and scope of the problem gives rise to questions about the very foundation of society. It is theology which can effectively question the value system characterized by the word "useful" and question some current attitudes toward aging. Current theology also presents conceptions of God and of religion which can be supportive of a call to expanded spiritual awareness and new life styles. It should offer alternatives to the technocratic value system and lead not only the aged but the entire society toward a more redemptive structure of existence.

In Chapter VI, the role of the church as supportive transition agent is explored. The church has the resources for this role. It must accept individual aged persons where they are and, by providing practical help, create a climate for achieving spiritual maturity. Three levels of involvement are suggested for practical help and the orientation of spirit toward a redemptive future is explored. It is hoped that this dissertation may help toward rediscovering a valued place for the aged in modern society.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Aging has been a problem for humanity since persons have been consciously aware of the fact that life held a period of growth, a period of vitality and strength, and a period of decline ending with death. The problem very simply stated is this: The period of decline introduces humans to a period in life which is less than the best that the organism has experienced. In this period the peak of energy flow and efficiency has been passed and can never return.

This is a problem for humanity in that extraordinary adjustments must be made for the declining period. The decline in energy means that the peak productive capacity cannot be maintained till the end of life, although basic requirements for subsistence continue till death. Preparation for this inequitable balance between loss of energy and continued basic needs must be made before the decline of energy in order for life to continue. Either the family and/or community makes provisions for the support of basic needs or the individual accumulates enough wealth to buy this support in the declining period until death. This has been so from the beginning.

With the advent of the industrialized society, the way in which these adjustments were made within the society as a whole began to change. The result of these changes meant that, in place of extended family arrangements for the care of the elderly, there emerged the idea that institutions were needed. It is true institutions were

needed, but something was missing in the institutions. The aged relinquished their self-respect. They lost it when they lost their work, for productive ability had replaced wisdom as a supreme value in the industrialized society.

This is the circumstance today. The aged have lost the source of their self-respect. The resultant isolation and loneliness is only symptomatic of the broader sociological condition created by an historical period which exhibits the replacement of human values with technological values.

The intensity of this problem is increased by the fact that the number of aged persons within our society is increasing at a rate out of proportion with the remainder of the population. Bert Kruger Smith, who is Executive Director of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health in Austin, Texas, has written that, "In the past 100 years our total population has grown to be five times as large as it was. Our middle-aged population is nine times as large, our older population 17 times greater."¹ She also states that,

Such a situation is new to our times. Today, right now, about 4,000 Americans reached their 65th birthday; 3,000 died, leaving an extra 1,000 persons. Approximately one in 10 Americans is 65 or older. They number more than 20 million. By the year 2000 they will be closer to 30 million.²

In the face of information like this a problem which has always been with humanity takes on a new urgency, and there is a demand placed

¹Bert Kruger Smith, "An American Dilemma," *MH*, LVIII:3 (Summer 1974), 27.

²*Ibid.*, p. 27.

upon contemporary society to find a new foundation on which to generate aged persons' self-respect.

This circumstance, the fact that aged persons have lost the respect they enjoyed in earlier periods of history, presents a curious irrationality to contemporary society. The industrialized technocratic societies' emotions value youth over age, vitality over wisdom, and freshness over maturity. This leaves old-age as a time to be dreaded and results in many psychological compensations designed to deny the arrival of old-age. But at the same time that these psychological compensations are created, there is no movement to create a ceremony which would venerate premature death, death that would prevent a person from experiencing old-age. We have yet to hear the joyous affirmation of life cut down before it has reached the full maturity of old-age. We may have heard someone suggest that "we should consider him lucky" but generally such statements are voiced in hope of softening the sorrow for the living rather than in joyful affirmation of the early or unexpected death. We seem to live in a curious inconsistency with respect to our emotional attitudes toward the prospect of aging.

On the one hand, we sense a feeling of impending melancholy. Our anticipation of this feeling can often be worse than the feeling itself. Nonetheless, ever present is the dread of this impending condition which we cannot evade short of a premature death. An existential element for all human existence and probably the most persistent element of our existence is the "urge for life." This term can certainly be broken down into various contributing elements with

more technical psychological and sociological terms applicable to them, but for my purpose the phrase "urge for life" designates adequately that depth beyond which there is no depth where the drives of our existence are inclined toward life rather than death. It is this dominant urge which creates the curious inconsistency in which we live; for it will not allow the most lucid rational argument for premature death to become dominant within a society of human beings. The dominant thrust and the allegiance of the society orient themselves toward the longevity which will result in the experience of being an aged person.

Given the nature of human existence, that there is a progressive decrease in one's ability to cope with the environment as a person past the years of maturity, it must be assumed that the aged have adaptive mechanisms which allow them to meet this condition with reasonable tranquility. In other words, the feeling tone of the individual can make an adjustment to the aged condition, regardless of the circumstances, which enable that person to cope with his or her own consciousness if not with the environment. The judgment that aged persons are unable to cope is generally made from the perspective of younger persons who view the aged person's condition from their own consciousness of that which is necessary to achieve a rewarding quality of life. The point is that the interpretation of a rewarding quality of life by the aged person would not be synonymous with an interpretation by a youthful or middle-aged person. This is an important point; for we need to bracket out our projections of dread and fear when we

are dealing with problems of aging.

As we bracket out these projections we can then talk about the threefold nature of the problem as it confronts us in our historical situation. One aspect is the physiological one which is inherent in the human organism. Second is the psychological one which in large part is how the individual spirit adapts to the phenomenon of aging. Third is the sociological one or the society's response to aging. It is the latter, the sociological factor, that will be my major concern. It is this factor that has much to do with the quality of life which the aging person experiences. The cultural setting has great influence on a person's self-image and how the person feels about himself at this stage of life. One's self-image greatly influences the feeling tone of the "adaptive quality" to which we referred earlier. The current historical setting must be altered so that the sociological setting generates a positive self-image rather than destroying an aged person's "adaptive quality."

It is the thesis of this paper that the church has a significant role in this endeavor, that once the problem has been placed in an historical perspective and undergirded by a knowledge of the current studies on aging, then it is possible to bring the current value structure into question from a theological perspective and give a programmatic proposal aimed at ultimately achieving the regeneration of a place for the aged in modern society.

In order to support this thesis, a review of historical attitudes toward aging will be presented in Chapter II. Chapter III

will analyze two modern theories for dealing with the problem; and Chapter IV will present the physiological and psychological findings from current gerontological studies in order to distinguish between normal aging and pathological aging. In Chapter V theology's role as inquisitor will be addressed and theological conceptions necessary to support redemptive change will be presented. Chapter VI will propose a role for the church as the agent which initiates needed change and provides the supportive environment for individuals to participate in changing situations.

CHAPTER II

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Aging was not a problem for the pre-modern period of our history in the sense that it is a problem today. One pivotal fact creates the watershed between the modern and the pre-modern attitudes toward aging. That fact eases into focus when we look to cultural attitudes toward wisdom. In contemporary society wisdom is no longer prized nor valued as it was in the pre-modern period. We depend upon books, computers, and other storage systems as the receptacles of knowledge today. It is not wisdom that is prized so much as it is the ability to find one's way around in the storehouses of information. This reality appears to negate the need for human receptacles of knowledge who possess not only information, but also an ability to interpret that information with a grandeur which men call wisdom. The simple fact that men of age seem no longer necessary as the containers of information for the rest of the race does more than any other thing to contribute toward "uselessness" as a condition of aged persons in our society. It is also true that with more rapid social change we value new knowledge and suspect that the aged have stopped learning. The other facts about aging, increased longevity because of medical breakthroughs, for example, merely serve to accentuate the loss of status during old age. The loss of status resulting from uselessness places the problem on a different existential ground for modern persons as compared with pre-modern human beings. We can change individual

circumstances, but we cannot alter the current existential fact that the aged are useless in an industrial society. The threat of the immediate future (as we face resource depletion), is that the aged may be considered unnecessary in addition to being thought of as useless. The ground on which the quality of life for the aged of pre-modern man stood has faded away in the society created by modern man.

Aging in our society is predominantly a historical problem rather than a biological or a physiological one. The human organism has demonstrated a proclivity for longevity. Medical advances have made longer life not only possible but probable. It is the historical phenomenon of the industrialized, technological society and the attendant application of the scientific method to the sphere of human relations which leads me to the conclusion that aging as we experience it is a historical problem. The application of technological attitudes to human relations generates such notions as: The human being serves a function within the society; A person should be rewarded for that function; Demand is the controlling factor in determining the value of that function; When one's function has ceased to be valued one must adjust so that he/she can serve another worthwhile function. Thus, we have the growing emphasis for job retraining or a second career within our society. But the aged cannot make the adjustment with the speed that is required to remain functional. Once their function is served, there is a gold watch or maybe a dinner and an introduction to the chilly spaces within our midst which we have constructed for the useless people. Their uselessness is not the result

of biological or physiological degeneration so much as it is the result of a prevalent mood of this historical period. Most of our aged generation have bought this mood and consider it a justified necessity. This is the sociological circumstance generated by the historical phenomenon of the industrialized technocratic society which exists today.

The most significant source for gaining a deeper understanding of the pre-modern attitude toward aging is found in the literature of our Judaic tradition. The Old Testament provides several illustrations which illustrate the pre-modern attitude. Age is to be revered in the Israelite community. Leviticus tells us that "You shall rise before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man" (19:32). *Ahikar* 2:61 seems to indicate that this attitude was probably characteristic of the entire Middle East in that period. It is apparent that the attempt to instill respect for the aged was one of the basic educational aims among the Biblical Hebrews. Whereas our culture regards the attributes of youth as worthy of our veneration and admiration, the Biblical Hebrews, according to some statements in Proverbs, regarded childhood as a period of ignorance and folly and a time when the intellectual capacity for wisdom has not yet developed. Proverbs 7:7 states " . . . and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man without sense . . ." and Proverbs 22:15 expounds that "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child."

There was, of course, good reason for the effort to educate the youth so that they would have a great respect for the aged and

elderly. It makes sense that they would not only take steps to engender a respect for the aged but also to negatively devalue youth when they compared the values of youth to the values of age. It was more than just a trick on the part of the aged to assure status and respect in the community. The historical circumstance required this attitude; the aged were the vessels which contained the accumulated knowledge of the family. This knowledge infused the flavor of the tradition through the interpretation of the aged and therefore was looked upon as wisdom. This response to the aged was so much a part of the life of the Biblical Hebrews that they equated age with wisdom. This resulted in an esteemed status for the aged of the Biblical society. They were ranked with the princes and persons of high office as leaders of the people. Isaiah 9:14 makes a statement that illustrates this: "The elder and honored man is the head." Instead of "retirement" as we think of it the aged continued to fill a needed role within their community; for the aged served as counselors and advisers. Their words were respectfully regarded by their children and grandchildren.

In addition to receiving respect and veneration, there were other benefits for aged persons in Biblical society. Not only did veneration come from society at large but more importantly deep respect was accorded the aged person within his or her immediate family. In Biblical society the aged were maintained in the extended family. For the most part it was not simply a matter of putting up with grandparents as is the case so often today. Their function may change

somewhat within the family from active worker to wise advisor, but nonetheless they maintained a necessary function. To go along with this function as the wise counselor and sage advisor, there were practical conventions which supported them. In particular, there was the admonition that the young keep silent when the elders spoke. We have evidence of this in the book of Job. There is a scene in the book when Job's four friends are trying to comfort him. His friends are around him, three of them are old and one of them is young, and they all speak in turn to comfort him. Elihu, who is the young one, keeps silent while the other three speak. Job 32:4 records, "Now Elihu had waited to speak unto Job, because they were older than he," and it was only when he was sure that the older men had nothing to say that he said, "I am young in years, and you are aged; therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. I said: 'Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom'" (Job 32:6-7).

Other conventions contributed to veneration of the aged within the family. The fifth commandment enjoins everyone to honor his father and mother. In addition to this enjoiner, it is promised that those who keep this commandment will have a long and prosperous life. Exodus 20:12 says that you must "honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." This same commandment is stated slightly differently in Deuteronomy 5:16: "Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you." In addition

to the strength of one of the Ten Commandments there is also the support of several proverbs which urged honor of the father and the mother as well as giving some interpretation to the meaning of "honor." Proverbs 1:8 states that honoring one's parents means to "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching;" also there is Proverbs 23:22 which calls on one to "Hearken unto your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." In Leviticus we have the same theme; in chapter 19:3 it states, "Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my sabbaths." Further, if the straightforward statements were not enough, there were statements to the effect that those who did not honor their elders were foolish and to be looked upon with disdain. Proverbs 13:1 indicates that "A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke."

Given the favorability of old age and its advantages of status and respect, it is no wonder that it was regarded as a desirable period of life. Many would lie about their age and add years in order to be considered older rather than subtracting years in order to make themselves younger. This could be one of the explanations for the fact that in the Old Testament many men appear to have lived to extraordinary ages. It is reported that Abraham lived to be 175, that Isaac was 180, Moses 120, Joshua 110 and Jacob lived to be 147. Nor was it bad manners within the conventions which regarded age with honor to ask a man how old he was. As Jacob was introduced to Pharaoh by his son Joseph, Pharaoh politely asked about the age of Jacob, "How many

are the days of the years of thy life?" Jacob answered with some pride, "The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojournings" (Genesis 47:9).

The pride in the number of one's years seems to be one of the attitudes that has survived until today in some parts of the Middle East. Raphael Patai says that it has remained customary to exaggerate one's age in order to gain added prestige. He tells this story as an example.

One day in Palestine in 1933, an Arab friend took me to visit the Khalidiya Library in the Old City of Jerusalem. We were received in a friendly and hospitable way by Sheikh Amin al-Ansari, keeper of the library, an aristocratic old man with finely chiseled features, a dark olive complexion, and a beautiful, flowing white beard. He climbed up ladders with great ability to show me rare manuscripts kept on top shelves, and when I asked him not to exert himself he answered: 'Allah be thanked, although I am eighty years old, I am still in good health.' I complimented him on this, and after we left, my friend said to me with a smile: 'Did you really believe that he was eighty years old? He is only in his early sixties.'¹

Lest we leave the Biblical period with the impression that the benefits of old age were such that the hardships of old age were completely eliminated by autosuggestion, we must now be reminded that there were some very realistic opinions of old age in existence at that time. The Biblical reverence and respect for old age simply serves as a reminder to us that the horrors and isolation which our aged experience are not a necessity of nature. Life has not predetermined our

¹Raphael Patai, "What the Bible Teaches about Aging," *Jewish Heritage* (Summer 1960), 20.

current attitude toward old age as the only possible one. The attitudes and resultant conventions of the societies of Biblical times greatly reduced the psychological adjustments attendant on old age and clothed these adjustments with a wealth of emotional richness rather than the cold and useless isolation to which we can look forward today.

One of the realistic observations about old age prompted this prayer found in Psalms 71:9. "Do not throw me away in the time of old age; when my strength is failing me, do not forsake me." Also in II Samuel 19:33-38, there is an aged person's plea for consideration of his age from the King.

But Barzillai said to the king, 'How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am this day eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord and king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? Pray let your servant return, that I may die in my own city, near the grave of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do for him whatever seems good to you.' And the king answered, 'Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you; and all that you desire of me I will do for you.'

The attitude of "value" exhibited during the Biblical period dominated Western society in pre-modern history, and the "useless" attitude which characterized the modern period gradually came to dominance as the industrialized society progressed. This perspective on the attitudes of the Biblical people from the times of the Old Testament places into perspective the sharp differences between the experience of old age in those days and the modern experience of old

age. The shift from one attitude to another cannot be assigned a definite date; it has been a gradual shift, but its result allows a sharp differentiation between then and now. The evidence for this shift of attitude is seen in the patterns of care which resulted from these attitudes. The two resultant approaches can be characterized by calling the pre-modern period's approach by the name "extended family care" and the modern period's approach "institutional care." These designations do not mean that no form of extended care exists now but merely that the dominant attitude toward old age during these periods is characterized by these approaches.

The shift began very early. Initially there were isolated cases. But as the value systems of ancient Near-Eastern societies began to crumble, the number of aged persons outside the extended family increased. For these persons, society's response was inadequate. Neither regulations nor institutions were created to assist them.

If not living among the family, as was customary, destitute aged people were treated as part of the general social problem created by poverty and weakness and the precepts concerning charity and alms giving applied to them.²

The Jewish people have recorded in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* a history of their work with the aging. From that article it is possible to briefly sketch the movement from extended family to institution. Though this information is directly applicable to one group within the larger society, it is representative of a larger movement within the

²Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Age and the Aged," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), II, 346.

total society. It will show the gradual shift which has recently become so distinctively different.

The Middle Ages were a particularly bad period for the aged Jewish person. It was the transition period. The dominant mode of care in the extended family continued to degenerate and the concept of institutional care had not yet emerged. Because of the persecutions and massacres there was much migration and this brought additional suffering to the Jewish aged. Though they were not totally neglected and merely left to die, there is not much evidence that the aged were a concern of the organized community. However, this attitude began to change around the seventeenth century. An example of this change was the resolution passed at the Council of Lithuania in 1650. This resolution was the result of Chmielnicki massacres and stressed the community's duty to support " . . . in any case married and unmarried women and old persons." It is reported that at "Abotu the same date the Jewish community in Rome introduced care of the aged as one of the four divisions of its charitable activity. A home for the aged was founded in Amsterdam by the Sephardi community in 1749."³

Since about the second half of the eighteenth century, the Jewish people have felt the need for special care for the aged. This reflects the breakup of the traditional family cohesion. But the significant thing about the attitudes of the Jewish community at this time is that they are more prepared to address the problems of aging as a social problem separate from the issue of poverty. This is a

³ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

significant step for Jewish care of the aged and is the foundation of the concept of institutional care which now exists. It reflects a new sense of compassion and understanding of the aged as a normal part of a society's responsibility for the conditions of those within it. This feeling led to the establishment of the *Mishenet Zekenim* society. The English translation of the name is "the support of the aged." The society was established in 1796 in Hamburg and made weekly provision for the care of the aged. The process which occurred over the next few years is described in this way.

An old-age home was founded in Berlin in 1829, and in 1839 the Hamburg community set aside a building for old men and women where they received lodging, support, and clothing. The Frankfurt community founded a home in 1844 for men and women aged over 60 without means of support. A Viennese family donated several houses for accommodating aged Jews of the community. The number of Jewish homes for the aged increased from the middle of the 19th century, as social care of the aged developed. By the present century most large communities in Europe included a home for the aged (often called *Moshav Zekenim*) among their welfare institutions. In 1938, there were in Germany 67 homes for the aged with 3,568 beds.⁴

The current Jewish situation is one of highly developed and organized attempts to address the problems of aging in our society through various homes, centers, and even towns for the aged. Today the Jewish society in Israel and the dispersed community address the problem of aging in this way through various Jewish welfare societies. The organization and location of these societies are not so important as the fact that they represent a change in the dominant method of dealing with the problem of aging in Jewish communities as well as in

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 348.

the Western culture at large.

The history of the shift in the Jewish attitude toward aging is representative of the shift in historical circumstance. Though the current outlook for aging persons is bleak and their prospects for status are not good, there is reason for hope. By recognizing the current problem as historical, we no longer need to view it as necessary. There has been a sharp increase in the awareness of aging problems recently. New insights about the psychological and physiological factors are emerging. It is a fact that by the year 2000 nearly 30 million of the U. S. population will be over 65. In the mix of increased awareness, increased knowledge and the sheer pressure of the increased aged population, it seems that the existential basis of the current sociological setting can be shifted. We need not conclude that the modern attitude toward aging is the last word. We may yet learn to surpass the status given aging in the wisdom of the Old Testament.

CHAPTER III

THE LIMITATIONS OF MODERN THEORIES

In the past two decades, with the advent of the science of gerontology, two principal theories or approaches toward the aging experience have emerged. These two theories have been identified as "activity theory" and "disengagement theory." The names are descriptive of the basic assumptions supporting the theories. Both approaches to the problems of the aged have gathered large followings but neither can overcome the criticisms of the other. Jaber F. Gubrium says that, "The differences between them stem largely from the implicit assumptions that each makes about the relationship between individual persons and collective behavior expectations."¹ He explains why neither has prevailed over the other.

Although they are theoretically distinct, both have suffered severe explanatory problems methodologically, as well as empirically. Neither has been able to account for a significant number of documented instances of old people's behavior that contradict what might have been predicted from its viewpoint alone.²

It is likely that a weakness in both theories is that they are rooted solely in the empirical manifestations of the problem as it exists today and are attempting to apply band-aids to a situation that requires much more than first-aid. A summary of these two theories

¹Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Myth of the Golden Years* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1973), p. 3.

²*Ibid.*

will help place the current situation into perspective.

Activity theory had its professional beginning with the publication of Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst, and Goldhammer's *Personal Adjustment in Old Age* (1949). Here, aging is seen as being primarily a problem of resolving the strains on self-conception which result from the change in roles which comes with old age. Emphasis is placed on the social structural aspect of aging in American society. This can be seen in the concept that personal adjustment is acknowledged by categories which relate to overt behavioral and psychological factors associated with role change. Activity theory makes a distinction between "(1) what might happen to *all* aged persons because of the socially-patterned nature of the life cycle, and (2) how persons react both overtly (behavior) and psychologically (attitudes) to later life cycle changes."³

The theorists of the activity theory make a delineation between the later life cycle changes in America and those in other countries. From these studies it is concluded that the more stable and sedentary countries give more structure to the roles that adults fill in later life while the aged in America have little or no definition of valuable roles for this cycle in their life. The importance of this understanding is applied to a person's perception of selfhood. We learn who we are within the context of the society in which we live. Out of our interactions in various social statuses and roles emerges our self-esteem. In the more stable societies, the well delineated age-statuses

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

lead to prestige, whereas altogether different psychological outcomes result within a society with no clearly defined roles. The result is a sort of psychological nihilism.

This work led activity theorists to conclude that aging in the U. S. had the following characteristics:

1. Old age roles are not clearly defined.
2. Social situations facing old people in the United States are not well-defined and therefore tend to be anomic.
3. Persons growing old and entering such situations face severe adjustment problems since they leave well-defined roles and enter 'undelineated ones.'
4. When no well-delineated, socially-meaningful role is substituted for a previously meaningful one, then persons internalize this condition. This leads to alienation and 'maladjustment' . . .⁴

Considering how to resolve this dilemma leads one to discuss what a socially meaningful role is in America. It was concluded that for the aged in the U. S. to have a "satisfying adjustment experience" two conditions would have to be met. One, the value of old age would have to be accepted, and two, publicly-valued roles would have to be created. Naturally the nature of these publicly-valued roles meant that they had to be "work-like."

One thing appears to be quite evident in the activity approach to aging. It is that the kind of activity defined as socially esteemed is fixed, namely, it is a specific round of behavior with all or most of the following characteristics:

1. It is work-like or instrumental, and not entirely expressive.
2. It is active and visible, i.e. the activity is publicly obvious.
3. The content of the activity is stereotypically middle-class (the successful aged tend to 'work at play').
4. Judgments of the successful aged are filled with awe.⁵

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8.

In Gubrium's words there is a "Calvinistic aura" about the activity theory. It is not surprising therefore, that the disengagement theory emerged as a challenge to the activity theory. It had its beginning in a tentative statement of the basic ideas by Cumming, Dean, Newell, and McCaffrey (1960). Their position was first stated thus:

There does, however, seem to be an implied theory of the aging process which underlies many empirical studies. We receive the impression that society withdraws from the older person, leaving him stranded. Many problem-oriented studies are based on the assumption that this tendency can be prevented by various programs for the aged designed to restore a measure of supportive social structures to the individual. We will offer an explicit alternative to the implied theory, namely that the individual cooperates in a process of disengagement which takes place between himself and society (Cumming *et al.*, 1960, p. 23).⁶

As opposed to the activity theory the disengagement theory operates around a single body of concepts. Basically it derives its basis from the functionalist approach of sociology. In general this approach views human behavior as a functional part of an organizational structure or system. The people are viewed as actors performing roles required by the system. It is from this viewpoint that the function of the aged is to disengage from the operative structure of the society. This disengagement refers to:

. . . an inevitable mutual withdrawal . . . resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to. The process may be initiated by the individual or by others in the situation. The aging person may withdraw more markedly from some classes of people while remaining close to others. His withdrawal may be accompanied

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 17.

from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself; certain institutions in society may make this withdrawal easy for him. When the aging process is complete, the equilibrium which existed in middle life between the individual and society has given way to a new equilibrium characterized by a greater distance and an altered type of relationship (Cumming & Henry, 1961, pp. 14-15).⁷

With the added dimension that it is considered to be universal, here are the main tenets of the disengagement theory:

1. Mutuality--persons do not act or construct as much as they carry out a normatively defined mutual disengagement with others.
2. Inevitability--the system's as opposed to personal needs and interests are dealt with, systemic needs inevitably being fulfilled.
3. Universality--all social systems, if they are to maintain equilibrium, must necessarily operate so as to disengage from the elderly, disengagement being a function pre-requisite to social stability.⁸

The proposed usefulness of this theory is that it allows us to view the necessity of the current conditions of aging within our society. Modern societies place a lot of emphasis on successful behavior based on standards of achievement and efficiency. Equilibrium within the society is a function of efficiency and high standards of performance. Cummings (1963) expressed it this way.

In the first place the organization of modern society requires that such competition for powerful roles be based on achievement. Such competition favors the younger because their knowledge is newer. . . . If Americans are to remain engaged in any serious way past the seventh decade, as many observers insist they must, roles must be found for them that younger people *cannot* fill. Only an elaboration of available roles can accomplish this because it is impossible for a society organized around standards of achievement and efficiency to assign its crucial roles to a group whose death rate is excessively high. When a middle-aged, fully-

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 20.

engaged person dies, he leaves many broken ties, and disrupted situations. Disengagement thus frees the old to die without disrupting vital affairs (pp. 384-85).⁹

This is the essence of the two major theories which currently vie for dominance in the quest for an adequate framework out of which to address effectively the problem of aging. Neither has met the situation adequately. The disengagement theory is stoically nihilistic while the activity theory is unrealistic in approach if not in analysis. We need a theory that is more realistic and humane than either of these.

Disengagement theory accepts the technocratic society's definition of "useful" without the faintest notion that this assumption should be questioned. It supports the notion that unproductive persons are useless and would have us stoically accept this as inevitable fact. Self-respect comes from acceptance of one's assigned role of second-class citizenship in the disengagement theory.

The activity theory, on the other hand, creates a different view of reality than that of the disengagement theory while making the same assumption about the nature of usefulness in a technocratic society. Activity theory buys the notion that value is derived from productivity, therefore aging persons maintain value by being active. Activity theory has more concern for the concept of self-respect in that it would have the aged person maintain their desire to be a valued unit of society by remaining active. It is assumed that

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 22.

activity is closely associated with productivity and therefore the result would be maintenance of self-respect. Here again self-respect is equated with the technocratic society's need for usefulness as an ultimate value. Here again the notion that value can be derived from other existential categories than utility is not even given consideration.

This situation emerges out of an unquestioned acceptance of our current society's value orientation which assumes that human survival is dependent on the values necessary for a technocratic system. The current horizon of human existence is limited to the equation that technology equals cultural achievement. Those who would opt for an alternative value system are threats and are generally pushed to the periphery. Witness the disdain accorded the hippie movement. There has been no serious consideration given to the question of alternative existential postures so that the unquestioned acceptance of current value orientation is not made by choice but made with the naive notion that the current system is right. The sad reality with which we are confronted, however, is that the set of assumptions underlying our current posture needs "usefulness" as a value more than "self-respect" and when a productive unit is no longer useful, there can be only weakly rationalized lip service given to its value. The reality is that industrialized technocratic societies devalue unproductive persons more than pre-industrialized societies. Neither of these theories question current values, and therefore both fail to provide more than a patch-work attempt to avoid the loss of

self-respect among the aged which has occurred in modern industrialized technocratic societies.

CHAPTER IV

THE AGING PROCESS IN CURRENT RESEARCH

By viewing the current problem of aging from a historical perspective and understanding its nature as a historical phenomenon rather than natural necessity, one can conclude that value structures underlying modern society perpetuate and intensify the problem. As one realizes that contemporary theories of dealing with the problem originate within the current value structures, one recognizes that both theories fail to address the source of the problem. In order to effectively address the problem's source, one should first look to current research for information necessary to differentiate between natural necessity and historical circumstance. This information is available from the recently born science of gerontology. We are indebted to gerontology for generating the wealth of new information about aging and for dispelling many illusions about aging.

In turning to gerontology, a paradoxical situation is created. The industrialized technocratic society is repelled by the "uselessness" of aging. It is the villain in the problem of aging. It devalues aging. It promotes the isolation and despair experienced by the aged. But, it is the same society which provides the methodology and motivation for the field of gerontology. Many illuminating and insightful studies have emerged from this field. Many erroneous illusions have been dispelled. The paradox is that the society most hostile to the experience of aging is at the same time the society

most productive of helpful information concerning aging.

Recognition of this paradox helps one keep the role of gerontology in perspective. One should not reject it because it is founded within current value structures, but neither should one look to it as the ultimate answer. Gerontological studies are dependent on objective detachment. Therefore, gerontology must ultimately value objective observation over concerned involvement. This ultimately limits gerontology's contribution. It is a very important contributor to the path away from current circumstances, but one must resist any temptation to seek ultimate answers from gerontology. One must rather concentrate on what information from gerontology helps distinguish natural necessity from historical circumstance. Its role is that of a light on the path rather than being the one who determines which path to take.

From this perspective one of the first items of information is that there is a distinction between the normal process of aging and pathological aging. The normal process of aging has not been definitively described, however, a sufficient number of studies have been completed to indicate that there is an identifiable normal process called aging. This process includes increased susceptibility to disease. Those who succumb to these diseases are those who experience pathological aging, which is aging accelerated by the presence of one or more of these diseases. This is one of the practical benefits from gerontology in that it dispells the notion that age is necessarily a time of disease. While it is true that there

is more illness among aged persons than in an equal number of younger persons, it is not true that disease is inevitable.

The World Health Organization's definition of health is not merely the absence of disease. It says that health is a state of total physical, psychological, sociological, and environmental well-being. This definition points to the necessity of separating normal aging from the pathology of aging. This is a difficult task. For example,

The metabolic disturbances we call diabetes, illustrate the difficulty in distinguishing clearly between biologically normal aging, pathological aging, and disease. Older persons with a so-called 'diabetic type' of glucose tolerance test show no evidence of diabetics on clinical examination. In fact, the blood glucose values in the fasting state may be quite similar in young and in the aged. The difference may only show up under specific stressful circumstances (as in the glucose tolerance test).¹

Though stated simply, and in laymen's language, it is easy to see that distinguishing normal and pathological aging is not a task for laymen but for trained and qualified persons. It is our task to find ways to benefit from their research. Although a definitive review of gerontological research is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a synoptic overview of pertinent physiological and psychological information provides the material important to my purpose.

PHYSIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

It should be noted that the distinction between the physiological needs of the aged and of the younger humans is a matter of

¹Ruth B. Weg, "Physiological Changes that Influence Patient Care" in Richard H. Davis (ed.) *The Psychosocial Needs of the Aged: Selected Papers* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, 1973), p. 6.

degree and not one of quality. The aged person is not a being qualitatively different from us. Recent information emphasizes that the aging process is continuous and consists of decreases in tissue elasticity, in ability of cells to divide and a decrease in all other factors that protect the physical well-being of the individual. It describes the physical and functional age changes which persons undergo but stresses that aging is a natural phenomenon and not one to be confused with disease.

An excellent synopsis of the normal aging process showing the critical functions that are at risk and the results for the aged person is given by Ruth B. Weg, a Ph.D. in gerontology. The material below is a paraphrase of information presented in two articles. The articles² present essentially the same material from two different perspectives. A paraphrased condensation enables us to benefit from her work without the repetition necessary with long quotation.

Cellular Loss

Passage of time in the life of the human organism brings steady decline of the functional capacities of cells, tissues, organs, systems, and therefore the whole person. Although the loss of cellular units by death in skin, blood, liver, gastro-intestinal tract, and bone marrow is partially replaced, the rate of destruction may exceed

²*Ibid.*, p. 5 and Ruth B. Weg, "Changing Physiology of Aging," in Richard H. Davis (ed.) *Aging: Prospects and Issues* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, 1973), p. 48.

the rate of replacement as age increases. CNS, muscle, and kidney cell units which are lost are no longer replaced by cell division or regeneration. These may be most crucial in the aging process since in the nervous system, for example, the functional neurons may be replaced by non-functional glial cells. This means that there is death of some units and a decrease of function in those which remain.

Central Nervous System Decreases in Integrative Function

This is perhaps the most significant alteration in the aging process. The central nervous system has as one of its functions the role of coordinator of the interactions of muscles, glands, neurons and blood. The conducting of the nerve impulses decreases in the elderly. The easily observable changes over time in the locomotor system could be accounted for by this change. Muscle tone and strength appear to peak between twenty and thirty years, then decline. This decline, however, represents only a ten to fifteen percent loss in the aged as compared to the young so that simple neurological function remains relatively unimpaired. Acts of everyday living, however, such as walking, getting up, lifting, bathing and cooking are made up of many nerve-to-gland, nerve-to-muscle, and nerve-to-nerve connections so that loss in conduction rate is compounded. Measurements of the changes in the separate components such as the decrease in long bone and vertebrae density or the biochemical changes in muscle and cartilage do not add up to the apparent overall loss of speed, flexibility, reserve and coordination which is apparent. The net

effect is that reaction time and speed of movement slow down. The loss of integrative capacity also contributes to memory loss, to difficulties with decision making and to decrease in homeostatic capacity. Whether one chooses to monitor heart rate, blood pressure, or resistance to infection, the magnitude of the displacement is greater and the rate of recovery is slower. Thus, it is that the decrease in the integrative function of the central nervous system is critical.

Fibrous Protein Changes

These changes influence the structure and composition of the skin, the vasculature, and those very important joints. The elastic fibers become thicker, they aggregate, and are less elastic. The collagen fibers become less soluble.

Measurable Changes in Endocrine Glands with Resulting Hormone Changes

The changes in the glands are gradual, nonetheless measurable. The hormone responses are also known to decrease with years. Particularly the hormones favoring the immunity process such as thyroxine, thyrotropic, hormone from the pituitary and the thymus hormone. The last one is probably the more important since it appears to stimulate the proliferation of the cells that synthesize the immune bodies or antibodies. The gonadal hormones also decrease. This decrease brings about slow involuntary genital tissue changes. In women after menopause, there is gradual atrophy of vaginal tissues which is evidenced

by low levels of lubrication. The uterus and the cervix also decrease in size. In men there is a steady decrease in testosterone which is accompanied by a lowered rate of spermatogenesis and frequent difficulty in achieving and maintaining erection. Though these changes mean that sexual performance is less frequent and not as predictable as in earlier years, it does not mean that the aged are sexually incompetent.

While glandular change for the most part means a decrease in hormone production, there is an increase in autoimmune response. This is a destructive process which sometimes leads to the destruction of healthy cells. It has been suggested that faulty antibodies may be synthesized and as such remain attached to cells and lead to this destruction of the healthy cells. Another possibility is that DNA (gene) change or RNA and enzymatic alteration may produce cells and tissues that are recognized as non-self, and are destroyed by normal antibodies.

The net result of these changes is that the decreases in turn decrease one's ability to fight disease and that the increases often lead to the destruction of one's own tissue.

Mineral Metabolism Changes

There is good evidence for this change. Under dietary and hormonal changes, calcium for example, may leave the bone and infest the soft tissues. If it enters the lining of arterioles and joint sacs it will lead to narrowed blood vessels and pain. If it stiffens

the rib joints there may be increased difficulty in breathing. It may also lead to changes in the bone structure which may cause reduction in height, the familiar stooped posture, and limitations in mobility which are all familiar marks of old age.

Breathing Becomes More Difficult

There is a measurable reduction in the efficiency of the breathing mechanism. There are two factors which contribute to this circumstance. The first is the decrease in the maximum breathing capacity, the residual lung volume, and the vital capacity. These changes are brought about by the changes in the muscles of the ribs and chest, arteriosclerotic changes in lung blood vessels, changes in elastic fibers, and/or changes in rib joints. The other factor is the measurable, progressive reduction of basal oxygen consumption. This decreases the necessary syntheses of the stuff or protoplasm. Since energy and raw materials for growth are derived from O_2 combining with nutrients, the aged person may generally have decreased reserves. This means that the aged person cannot do as much since he can only do as much as his current energy level allows. He has little or no reserve of energy.

The net result of these changes is that the energy of the aged is limited and with very little reserve there is less resistance to illness. In addition the total capacity of his system to generate the needed energy for the moment is also reduced by the reduction of his breathing capacity, residual lung volume, and the vital capacity.

Cardiovascular Function Changes

There is evidence for measurable change in heart and blood vessel structure. The cardiac output and stroke index go down so that the heart works harder and longer to achieve less. The renal blood flow, glomerular filtration and tubular exertion rates decrease. There is an estimate of 55% decrease of blood plasma flow through kidneys between the ages of three and eighty. However, peripheral resistance, circulation time and systolic blood pressure increase as the blood vessels narrow in age. This is especially true in aged persons whose blood vessels have narrowed with atherosclerosis and arteriosclerosis.

The net result is that there is a decrease in the capacity of the heart to cope with the stress of heavy work and emotional tensions.

Senses Decrease in Sensitivity

All the senses decrease in sensitivity with time. Not only smell, taste, and vision but touch and audition as well. The loss in audition, primarily at higher frequencies, begins at adolescence and appears to peak between the ages of forty and fifty. The net effect is that the world is somewhat duller than it was when we were youth.

Malnutrition Often Appears

There are often signs of malnutrition. This can be attributed to loss of appetite which is generally caused by loss of teeth, ill-fitted dentures and the decrease in the senses of smell, taste, and vision. Even the effect of a well-balanced diet can be minimized by

a decrease in the flow of digestive juices, reduction in peristalsis, increased constipation, and a good deal of "sweets eating." The "sweets eating" is often in the role of fulfilling psychological needs rather than a response to essential hunger.

The net effect of malnutrition is the increase in complications leading to acceleration of the aging process out of proportion to its normal progress.

Gastro-intestinal Tract Changes

The evidence for this change is the physical factors cited in the information about malnutrition and the reduced motility of the stomach and intestines, hemorrhoids and a decrease in fluid intake.

Genito-Urinary Tract Changes

There is an increase in urinary incontinence and in frequency of urination. This is often related to the enlargement of the prostate in men. It is often accompanied by infection of the urethra or the bladder with women.

The net result is that the aged individual is presented with new concerns that are a threat to his dignity and personality.

Organism's Ability to Cope with Stress Decreases

One of the most striking differences between young and old can be seen in response to stress, a decrease in capacity to readjust to change, to return to equilibrium. Certain parameters, such as blood

sugar, blood proteins, pH, blood volume, even heart rate and blood pressure are relatively stable and not very different in young and old subjects at rest. However, such an observation may tell us little about real capacity. With stress, whether physical as in exercise, or emotional in excitement or fear, the magnitude of displacement is greater, and the rate of recovery is slower with increasing age--thus homeostasis is less easily maintained in older persons. This changing capacity for stress response can be identified by the decrease of certain hormones in urinary excretion. One of the first measurable hormonal responses to stress is ACTH, the trophic hormone of the anterior pituitary; this in turn stimulates the adrenal cortex to secrete the corticoids. Another measure of body response to stress is an initial rise in urine level of adrenaline and noradrenaline secreted by the adrenal medulla.

Increased Susceptibility to Disease

Finally there is empirical evidence that there is an increased susceptibility to disease and in particular chronic disease. There seems to be a statistically significant increase in death from causes which earlier in life would not have occurred.

Ruth Weg's work illuminates the physiological changes directly related to aging. Her work, however, does not cover the psychological aspects. It is necessary to turn to other sources for that information.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFORMATION

When we refer to the psychological aspects of aging, we refer to the inner adjustment which an aged person must make in response to aging. It should not be merely a restatement of the psychological needs of humans in general, though it should be assumed that the basic psychological needs and drives are still operative in the aged. For the most part the aged have a set of psychological adjustments which no other age group has. Adjusting to this set is not a sudden confrontation but is a gradual movement which evolves over several years. The dynamics of each individual's adjustment is characterized by his or her previous patterns of meeting with changing situations, but the desired goals of this engagement will be different in that achievement of work oriented goals will not be the barometer of success. This is the source of the temptation to yield to the subtle feeling of uselessness which our society has propagated. Avoiding this temptation and achieving a measure of self-esteem and self-worth despite the cultural situation is the psychological task of the aged in this generation. E. V. Cowdry has quoted Dr. Wilma Donahue as saying that:

The elderly individual is under the load of past experiences, not all of which are still useful; altered physiologic states usually involving some decrement of function; changes in personal appearance which advertise to his fellows that the aging process is at work; and many new social circumstances such as retirement, reduced income, bereavement, loss of status and recognition, and an abundance of leisure. The many major adjustments that aging people face make more demands upon them than have been made since the period of adolescence.³

³E. V. Cowdry, *Aging Better* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1972),

Though this is a difficult time and though the general level of energy decreases, the research results from gerontological studies indicate the possibility of rewarding compensations. The organism does have psychological mechanisms for adjustment available. Kurt W. Black has stated that:

Research on aging has shown important contrasts between objective social and behavioral changes and the individual's reaction to them. Faculties and abilities as well as social rewards and objective social conditions decline rather consistently during the later years of the life cycle. On the other hand, subjective satisfaction and morale not only do not decrease but seem to improve during old age (Riley and Foner, 1968; Back and Gergen, 1966).⁴

This would seem to indicate that the psychological capacities are maintained at a relatively high level of function as opposed to the measurable decline in the physiological functions.

There is evidence also that a person's learning capacity is maintained during the aging process. There is even a gain or increase in capacity on some mental tasks. This is particularly true of the amount of information which can be stored. James E. Birren points out that, " . . . , there appears to be a continual increase in the amount of information that we have stored in us."⁵ For example, a college graduate may have known 20,000 words and by the age of 65 he may have

p. 43.

⁴Kurt W. Black, "Transition to Aging and the Self-Image," *Aging and Human Development*, II (1971), 296.

⁵James E. Birren, "The Experience of Aging," in Richard H. Davis (ed.) *Aging*, p. 2.

known 40,000 so that his vocabulary will have doubled. The capacity to store information increases with age.

In 1920 Owens, using the Army Alpha test, tested male freshmen students at Iowa State College. He tested them again thirty years later and then again, forty years later. The first retest revealed "a substantial gain in the score for the group as a whole and no single individual earned a total score lower than the one he earned as a freshman." On the second retest, there were declines in the scores of some of the subtests but no significant change in the level of the total score.⁶ The results of these tests would seem to substantiate the recently altered view of mental competence and age. Until recently, it was the general opinion that mental deterioration was an inevitable concomitant of old age.

Increase in capacity is not the whole picture, however. While the capacity for storing and retaining information increases, the ability to sort and retrieve information from the storehouse slows down. When pressed by time the older adult does poorly. When given time to work at his own pace the result is significantly different, and the older adult can handle larger chunks of information with more relevance than younger people. James E. Birren refers to this as the race between the chunks and the bits.

With maturation comes a greater conceptual grasp so that we can size up the situation and then look to the relevant items in our store. This is what I call the race between the chunks and the bits. While younger people say, those between 18 and

⁶Cowdry, p. 77.

22, can process more bits per second, and even though by age sixty that number may be halved, the older person may process bigger chunks. The race may go to the tortoise because he is chunking, and not to the hare because he is just biting along.⁷

The "bitting along" begins to get even slower when bits of irrelevant information are introduced into the environment. P. M. A. Rabbitt discovered in England that "older people slowed down more than the young people when there is irrelevant information in the environment."⁸ The way that the aged handle the problem of too many "bits" is that they experience a "cognitive overload." They "loadshed" in order to deal with too much information. This is a method which the cognitive function of the body has to adjust to the physiological changes which are taking place in the body.

A very interesting piece of research has been conducted by Diana Woodruff. It has been shown by some researchers that with increasing age the dominant alpha frequency decrease. In youth it may be ten to twelve cycles per second while in older adults it may be seven and one-half or eight cycles per second. This is important in that some, particularly Surwillo, maintain that the dominant alpha wave relates to reaction time. Woodruff has been investigating ways to modify the dominant alpha frequency with somatic feedback conditioning. She wanted to see if she could increase the frequency in older adults and decrease the frequency in youth. Her goal was to stimulate younger behavior in the aged and older behavior in the youth.

⁷Birren, p. 3.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 5.

It turned out that by appropriate conditioning techniques she could modify the frequency of the brain wave. She could bring up the frequency in older people. Also, their reaction time did speed up somewhat, which gives some evidence in support of Surwillo.⁹

Though one would want to raise many questions about procedures and long-term aftereffects, the implications of this result is potentially revolutionary for our current attitudes toward aging.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The information available from gerontology supports the notion that age is physiologically less than the best the human organism has experienced. It is natural necessity that we accept a decline in energy and nearly all vital functions. But the information also indicates that decline in mental alertness is not natural necessity. The one function of the human organism which seems to resist decline and in some areas increases its capacity is the mental function. It would appear that where decline in mental alertness is expected, as it is in a modern society, it will occur. When this does occur it is a historical phenomenon rather than natural necessity. This is the point which gerontology helps clarify.

The results indicate an innate capacity not only to adjust but to experience rewarding mental accomplishments. This is in accord with the ancient function of the aged as containers of wisdom. It would seem that the hope for restoration of respect for the aged of

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

the future lies with their ability to actualize their full mental capacity toward the achievement of wisdom.

CHAPTER V

THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THEOLOGY

It has been stated that the aged in our society have been uprooted from their role as the containers of wisdom by the historical phenomenon of the industrialized-technocratic society and its need to value that which is "useful." It has been shown that despite the modern disdain of the aged, the science of gerontology has generated some solid investigation of the normal aging process. This research has been enlightening in spite of the fact that the underlying theoretical guidance for all current work with the aged adopts unquestioningly the world-view of the industrialized-technocratic societies which has spawned the problems of aging we now confront. It is questionable, however, whether this world-view has the redemptive quality necessary to absorb a variant value system for even the aged population. At this point we cannot rely on the rhetoric of the society or any of its agencies, but must look to the existential reality. The existential reality for the aged sector of current society is despair and loneliness. This situation speaks loudly of the rhetoric of the current society about care and concern for the aged. This desperate situation is evidence that the industrialized-technocratic society is unable to creatively question its own structure.

One of theology's historical characteristics has been its ability to question society's underlying value assumptions. When combined with redemptive vision, this questioning changes the

perspective of society. St. Augustine and Luther accomplished significant changes with their work. Their work functioned to alter society both during and following their lifetime. Theology fulfills a unique role within society when it functions in this way. Since the current problem of aging is directly related to the industrialized-technocratic society's underlying value system, it warrants the attention of theology and the church.

When viewed from a theological perspective the current problem is that the industrialized-technocratic society fails to provide a supportive setting for aged persons. There is no place or setting within the society that has the feelings associated with home and belonging which commands the admiration and respect of society. For example, there is no learned society of distinction whose members are required to be over 65 years old. The net effect is that status is not generally available for aged persons. The underlying assumptions out of which we live serve to push out and isolate unproductive individuals. This eliminates the aged person. Efficient production is more highly valued than wise maturity.

This attitude affects the cultural spirit, the source of our feeling of self-worth. It does not provide a source for verifying the self-worth of the aged person in our society. It is not that the persons who are aged have produced the problem of aging with which we are faced, it is rather that the society in which they find themselves gives no value to the person who has passed his or her peak of production. Now lest it be thought that I am too harsh with this

judgment, I invite you to participate in a little mental experiment. Think back to the last person you met whose background you did not know. If you are like me, then you have to admit that at some point in the conversation the question was asked, "What do you do?" This urge to ask, "What do you do?" is an indication of our verification of worth by production.

Currently the aged person's only hope for authentication, or a feeling of value, is feats of unusual ability, courage beyond the norm of their peers, previously outstanding achievements, or extraordinary spiritual awareness. The average person who has not demonstrated ability for any of the first three characteristics has only the possibility of spiritual awareness to authenticate his existence, and the general level of spiritual awareness within contemporary society is so low that, here again, it takes a person of extraordinary insight and persistence to develop this possibility for his life.

Those who visit older people in parishes see the evidence of this situation in fear, loneliness and a feeling that life has been a cruel hoax. The promised golden age of retirement has become a grotesque struggle simply to make ends meet. It is grotesque in that today more money and more energy is required for subsistence than in the years when the retirees were preparing for retirement, and they have now less money and less energy to meet the demands placed on them. Add to this situation the underlying feeling of uselessness and it is a desperate situation.

Now when we have reached this level in our society, when the

ship lists because so much emphasis is placed on useful production as verifying self-worth and we can see no balance, then there is a serious spiritual problem. As the Psalms said, "all the foundations of the earth are shaken." Paul Tournier says it well.

The problem of old age does not concern only the old. It calls in question the whole of our society, and exposes its faults. That it is inhuman is verifiable at any age. But this is felt more especially in childhood, when we begin to discover the world and its injustices, and when we are too weak to defend ourselves. Later on, in the full strength of active life, we can at least fight, stand up to injustice, contend with fate. But when old age comes, we find ourselves powerless once again, and feel once more the pain of the faults in our civilization.¹

The situation seems to point clearly to the need for an alternate value system if the problem is to be changed.

When one considers the desperate plight of the aged and thinks of change, the conservatism associated with aging appears to be a barrier. If it is concluded that the conservative nature of age is to be accepted without question, then we implicitly deny a significant energy field in human existence. Further, by accepting this notion we yield to the dominant value of productivity which excludes aged persons from society's life flow. Though one cannot deny an element of natural conservatism, one can question the degree to which contemporary conservatism of aging is natural necessity. The normal conservatism of old age could be described more accurately as cautiousness. Out of a life-long experience of dealing with people and promises, older persons are naturally cautious. This cautiousness is more an orien-

¹Paul Tournier, *Learn to Grow Old* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 36.

tation of the emotions than a deep-seated attitude toward life itself. It is the refusal to be overly-excited about something until it is a reality, for experience has taught that dreams become reality through hard struggle and tenacity. This hard won attitude toward life results in an awareness that this process of struggle has its own reward and that it is a gift. The gift is that things can be accomplished, that there is a correlation between persistence and a feeling of achievement. The result of this realization is not despair and rebuke for the life process, but a mature respect and love for the process that leads to achievement. This cautiousness is the normal conservatism characteristic of old age. In pre-modern times it was called wisdom.

The conservatism that is characteristic of old age today has an ugly quality that is out of step with that cautiousness related to maturity. Many older people have a deep-seated attitude of fear toward the world in which they find themselves. They are lonely, despairing, and hopeless. Every valued attitude within our society is against the situation in which they find themselves. In essence they have no place. We know from psychology that people in a strange place have a certain amount of fear and tend to cling to that which is known, particularly if the way out of the strangeness is as yet uncharted, and even more so if there is a sense that there is no way out at all. Hence it is no wonder that the aged exhibit an extraordinary amount of clinging to any vestige of security. Since there is no place for them in our society with any semblance of self-respect attached to it,

there is only the alternative of fearfully clinging to the old.

We indicated earlier that the situation of the aged in our society is an historical phenomenon. It is the result of the industrialized-technocratic society's concept of usefulness, a category in which the aged do not fit. It is my contention that the characteristic conservatism of the aged in our society is also a product of this historical phenomenon, that the conservatism exhibited today is not a necessary result of becoming an aged person. Instead, we must see it in the perspective of the historical period in which we live and look for a possible alternative to this experience. One avenue which provides a plausible alternative is expanded spiritual awareness.

Though the accumulated years of a narrow consciousness would seem to preclude any possibility of this adventure, the existence of the life urge combined with the loss of status and other unsatisfactory circumstance around old age make this adventure a possibility. It offers the reward of transcending a lifetime of narrow viewpoints. It offers the possibility of going beyond the given conventions which most of us have conformed to all of our lives. This notion closely corresponds to what Erik Erikson has said of wisdom. He stated that:

. . . each generation must find the wisdom of the ages in the form of its own wisdom. Strength in the old, therefore, takes the form of wisdom in all of its connotations from ripened 'wits' to accumulated knowledge and matured judgment.² It is the essence of knowledge freed from temporal relativity.

Though wisdom and spiritual awareness are not identical

²Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 133.

qualities, they are both closely linked with mental activities. The aged person's mental capacities are his or her strength according to the gerontological information presented. It is in this context that the search for new modes of experiencing the world is significant. These "new" forms of consciousness are not foreign to the human psyche, but they are not prevalent in the psyche of persons who have experienced all of their existence in the context of the Western world. We are not opting for a form of experiencing the world opposed to the form that we have grown up with, but we are advocating the experience of expanding one's awareness through different modes of consciousness. It is important to be consciously aware of the experiential changes attendant on this process. It is the knowledge that one can view the world differently without losing one's sense of orientation that is significant. It is the awareness from an experiential base that different viewpoints do not destroy the emotional orientation out of which we experience, but serve to enrich it. Experientially this is a foundational basis for discovering the common basis which links all mankind. It is the basis for openness toward life in that it frees us from the self-protectiveness which sees all other orientations toward existence as threatening and therefore requiring attack.

For the aged this exploration should seek to evoke value structures which replace industrialized-technocratic values with redemptively humane values. Success would establish a necessary role for the aged and give new direction to the whole society. A barrier to success is that the natural and healthy conservatism of old age

is not normally motivated to search for new homelands. The current situation, however, is not normal. It is desperate. In a desperate situation, bold action is necessary.

Thomas Altizer makes a statement about faith that is applicable to the situation of the aged. He says,

Christianity alone among the religions of the world has come to understand itself as a forward-moving and evolving form of faith. But our situation is such that it is no longer possible to understand an evolving form of faith as preserving its previous forms and expressions in their original and given identities. If we will not confess that we have lost what we once knew as faith, then we will not be open to a new and revolutionary world of faith. Therefore a full acceptance of the dissolution of previous forms of faith is an indispensable presupposition for initiation into a new reality of faith.³

This is an interesting notion and one that has some validity in relation to the human psyche. It may be applicable to the situation of the aged in our own society. To put it very simply, "What have they got to lose?" If they succumb to the dominant thought patterns and attitudes of the time, they have lived their life and are now awaiting death. They are no longer useful. True they are slower, they are not as vibrant as youth, but are they useless? If they continue to subscribe to the industrialized society's necessary category of useful, then the answer has to be, "Yes, they are useless." There is no way that an aged person can recapture the strength, stamina, quickness and alertness required to retain one's place within a fast-moving technological society. The process of aging eliminates that possibility.

³Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent Into Hell* (New York: Lippincott, 1970), pp. 7f.

So far, the only alternative we have developed for the process of aging in an industrialized society is a false one. We attempt to glorify retirement. Glorifying retirement does not work because it is not real. It is fake, and the sense of life is gone for those who have once lived and worked in the mainstream of society. They are now outside, and no amount of activity or calls for joy over not having to work any more will substitute for the loss of the feeling that they are making a contribution. Within the current value system it seems that the effort to reclaim usefulness is a futile effort for the aged.

If this is the case, then is not their situation one of despair? It would certainly seem so, and the possibility of despair looming so close to the horizon may be the deterrent to frankly facing the fact that within the given value system of our society, the aged are now useless. But it is precisely at the point that we begin to question the given value system that the possibility of a new hope and meaning emerges. It is the hope to which Altizer referred. It is only at the point that the old structure is no longer meaningful that we can release it and look for meaning in other value systems. It is the aged who are no longer supported and given meaning within the value structure of our own society. It is they who have nothing to lose in venturing into a search for new sets of values. What can they lose? Their jobs, their social standing, their self-respect? They have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Questioning the value structure is not the only contribution

theology can make. It can also pursue an understanding of God and religion that is supportive of the courageous venture necessary to change the current problem of aging.

In order to propose a possible understanding of God, it is first necessary to allude to the current theological situation with respect to the question of God. It is without doubt that the concept of God is the most serious question facing contemporary theology. The need is not so much for a refutation of a serious atheistic argument but for a notion of God which makes sense to modern mentality. Theology is without a conceptualization of God that will pull humanity's spirit toward redemptive awareness of the current situation and provide definitive direction toward a life-giving future. It may be that the industrialized-technocratic society has temporarily overwhelmed theology with its obviously tangible success. Whatever the reason, in order to contribute something more than questions, theology must relate an adequate concept of God to the current problem of aging.

The most effective way to accomplish this goal is to refer to the living God and point to several of his attributes. The living God is active in the struggle for life and against death. He is the one who sets the course for the survival of not only humanity, but for the whole of nature. He is the one that gives direction to the human race through gentle persuasion and works around those who obstinately refuse to respond to his persuasion. He is the one who holds the life of every person as sacred and would have the structures of humanity respond to the sacredness of life rather than to the protection of

their hard-fought-for concreteness. He is the God who is kind to the poor and the downtrodden and who would reverse the culture's standards for judging the worth of a person. He is the God who draws us from the protection of our hard won achievements into the netherland of new struggle with the promise of new adventures in awareness. He is the God who draws us into a new future and moves beyond the achievements of that future, leaving behind the hard won conventions of the past. He is the God that can sustain vast areas of reality beyond our ability to comprehend. It is in these and similar statements that we attempt to communicate the God of the Judaic-Christian tradition. It is in these statements and many more that we turn our attention to the living God and away from mastery of conventions and projections of reality which have eschewed sacred values. Herein theology points to the delicate turning point for the notion of investing the energy of the aged in the search for new alternatives for the future.

If God is what we say he is in the preceding paragraph, then the traditional view that he is the preserver of the established order, as well as the comforter when the established order is threatened, must be turned around. It must be turned to the notion that God is the sustainer of life rather than the sustainer of forms of life, and in this respect, he is the one who calls us into a new future and requires the discomfort necessary to accomplish this new future. It is in this regard that we are to be wary of the emotional feelings which create in us comfort or discomfort in a given situation. To equate comfort with God and discomfort with being against God is to set

the foundation for worshipping inherited moralities and convention. It is the conventions with which we grew up that are the determiners of the feelings of guilt, comfort or discomfort which are normally to be found in given situations. God is active. He participates in bringing new structures of existence into being. When humanity actively participates in these changes, humanity should expect changing religious forms to accommodate the new modes of expression.

The recent work of Harvey Cox describes one possibility which can be helpful to the problem of aging. He describes the three elements of religion by saying that,

First, it tells us *where* we came from and in connection with that often tells us what is wrong with us and how we got that way. Theologians call this part of religion its 'myths of origin, creation and fall.' Second, religions hold up some *ideal* possibility for humankind. They project the blessed condition of salvation or satori or nirvana. They portray what it would mean to be fully saved or liberated, and sometimes this ideal is personified in saints and holy people. Third, a religion tells us *how* to get from our present fallen state (sick, alienated, lost, in captivity) to what we can be or ought to be or already are if we only knew it. This is the 'means of grace.'⁴

He also says that religion is story telling. As story telling it is

. . . that cluster of memories and myths, hopes and images, rites and customs that pulls together the life of a person or group into a meaningful whole. The cluster need not be very systematic, although theologians spend a lot of time trying to make it so. A religion can be creative or demonic, theistic or non-theistic, consciously held or only dimly recognized, static or mercurial, spontaneous or imposed, story or signal. Whichever it is, it lends coherence to life, furnishes a fund of meanings, gives unity to human events and guides people in making decisions. Religion, as its Latin root suggests, is what 'binds' things together.⁵

⁴Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 14.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 14.

In trying to point to the way in which this comes about, he says that

All human beings have an innate need to tell and hear stories and to have a story to live by. Religion, whatever else it has done, has provided one of the main ways of meeting this abiding need. Most religions begin as clusters of stories, embedded in song and saga, rite and rehearsal. Go back as far as the bloody Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh or to Homer's accounts of the gods and heroes of Hellas. Or read the tales told by Bantu priests, Cheyenne holy men or Eskimo shamans. They are all, in their own way, stories. The Hebrew Scriptures are largely stories; so is the New Testament. Rabbis, saints, Zen masters and gurus of every persuasion convey their holy teachings by jokes, *koans*, parables, allegories, anecdotes and fables. There has never been a better raconteur than Jesus of Nazareth himself.⁶

Cox goes on to say that autobiography, or testimony, and the collective story of the whole people, or people's religion, are especially important for religious expression. It is precisely the aged in our society who have many stories to tell. There is no evidence that with normal aging the rational functions decrease but on the contrary that the aged can synthesize the chunks of information impinging on them better than when they were young. For this reason it is my thesis that this search for enriching forms of consciousness with which we can transcend the sterile industrial and technological conceptions of productivity and efficiency is a task for the aged. If we can characterize the dominant value of the industrial West as "useful" and pose against that value system the word "expanded consciousness" we have at least an oversimplified designation with which to begin formulating an alternative for retirement mentality and a useful tool for addressing a theological perspective which will be relevant to the task ahead for the aged in our society. This typology would

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 9.

provide a recovery of the huge amount of wasted energy we now have with the retirement syndrome.

When we speak to the aged of altering lifestyles and exploring new modes of awareness, we are threatening the old ways and therefore the entrenched routine of a lifetime. It is imperative that we recognize this aspect of the suggested mode of operation and provide some form of compensation or reinforcement in the initial stage of transition. It is not our task to address this problem at this time, but it will be addressed in the chapter on a possible model for achieving this mode of operation.

This perspective shows the importance of relating a liberal theology to the aged. It is not their conservatism that we focus upon, but the need for their potential freedom for quest which should be seen as a demand made upon them at this time in our history. The demand is that they invest their energy into the search for modes of existence which yield meaning in the twilight of the society generated by the industrial West. The attempt is to bring the energy of the aged into the life flow rather than allowing it to remain the captive of the anesthetized system in which we presently live.

Posing an alternative to this situation is not merely a matter of tossing out a plausible solution. It involves a shift in thought patterns in order to gain a perspective on the plausibility of a proposed solution. In other words, it is not merely a matter of extending the same thought patterns out of which the current situation arose, for to do so would continue the underlying values which generated the

problem. It is essential that a proposed solution be generated out of a basis other than that which produced the current problem. If a redemptive proposal is to emerge, the notion that God's will is the only agent accountable for historical value structures needs to be reconsidered.

In my opinion, our attitude toward problems which present themselves from the realm of historic phenomena is that the source of the problem lies outside the scope of human decision. Problems which present themselves to us on this scale are still seen as problems that are in the province of God. They are considered beyond the scope of human decision and therefore we react to them in a random and fitful way when we can no longer avoid them. Then our response is generally a hesitant and inadequate one which means that the problem lingers for years until it either passes away with time or we learn to manage it, if it really begins to threaten the fabric of our social structures. The phenomenon of social welfare within the industrial society is an example of what I am referring to. We have yet to address the roots of the problem but we are managing in a systematic and structured way at present even if the structure and systems are inadequate to address the needs in a human and redemptive way. If we are to avoid the repeat of the approach to the social welfare system in our approach to the problem of aging, we must locate more responsibility for problems of this nature in the realm of social engineering rather than the realm of divine intervention. We must assume the burden of responsibility for this problem ourselves rather than assuming that

some divine intervention brought it on or will solve it. The thrust of the energy, if we assume that the problem is the result of our own decisions, is that we begin to realize that we can make the decisions which will resolve the problem.

The idea is not that we as humans become Gods. It is rather that we assume responsibility for the arenas of life that we are capable of assuming. If we assume that it is not our responsibility, then we make decisions which contribute to the situation by default. We participate in a negative and potentially destructive way in the process that is our responsibility and have no awareness of the fact. By assuming the responsibility we accept the capacity given us by God and become the responsible stewards of that responsibility.

The first step toward assuming this responsibility is that we recognize and take seriously the fact that we eventually live out the aspirations of our visions. For example, for the most part, we are today in our posture toward reality the result of the Cartesian world-view. For the most part, we look upon the world as divided between the subjective and the objective modes of experience. This designation has made sense of the world for a long time and has many positive values. But as with everything, for every value there are also deficiencies. In the recent past the deficiencies have begun to outweigh the assets so that we now say that this world-view is breaking down. As of yet, no new philosophical vision has captured the imagination so to give us a new direction. But once we understand that the visions by which we are captured, however incomplete, are the

directions our energy take and also generate the limits of the way we experience the world, then we can begin to take more seriously the notion that our aspirations are as much a part of the reality which we experience as the concrete manifestations which emerge out of these aspirations.

It is at this point that theology makes its unique contribution for it is also true that our notions of God greatly influence the limits of our aspirations. A stern disciplinarian limits us to conformity with the known value structure of the day. He is seen as the enforcer. New experiences are looked upon with mistrust and are to be seen as temptation. A persuader, however, is the One who participates with us in the process of evolving ever new responses to our situation. The value shifts from preservation to imagination and innovation. Life can be seen as a gift which can be joyfully entered into with the promise that God himself is active in the process and we can meet him in the experience of life itself. It is in this context that we can see the necessity of visualizing the nature of the quality of existence which would provide a vital alternative to the aged experience of life and tailor our conception of God to fit the coming into being of that quality of existence.

It seems to me that the essence of this approach to a theological basis for approaching the problem of aging is that it aims toward an awareness of the nurture and strength available in the life process. This strength and nurture is there, independent of economic or social structures. It is not dependent on any structure of values

deemed necessary by an industrialized nation. It is available to anyone who wishes to experience it and who is willing to enter the necessary search to discover it for himself. It is assumed that the predominance of the value system formed around the nurture and support of an industrialized nation limits one's sensitivity to alternative modes of experience. It is assumed that in order to expand the limits of our current experience there must be a broad scale search for avenues which broaden our experience. Thus far the burden of this search has fallen on the youth and has been met with disregard because it is irresponsible. The proof of the irresponsibility has been given by the youths themselves as they can maintain their search only so long before having to enter the "system" in order to carve out their own livelihood. This, however, is probably not proof, but an excuse for most people who are not willing to face the fact that their experience of life is narrow and limited. But with this kind of awareness placed before the despondent situation of the aged, it is conceivable that they too would enter the search for expanded awareness and broadened experience. Assuming this to be the case, it is conceivable that the aged would again serve a value function within our society as the aged leaders in the search for new lifestyles within an industrialized society and therein recover a position of self-respect in our society. This search would have to be taken seriously. It would require some organization, structure and assistance. It is theology's task to uncover the destructive assumptions of the historical period in which it finds itself and to assist with conceptions that point to redemptive

alternatives. It is the church's task to shape the methodology which moves toward the redemptive setting.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

In the second chapter I made the point that the low status experienced by the aged today is a historical phenomenon rather than a natural necessity. In the third chapter I reviewed modern theories for dealing with the problem of aging and stated that these theories failed to address the full scope of the problem. In the fourth chapter, the physiological and psychological findings from the field of gerontology were summarized to guide us in the distinction between normal aging and pathological aging. These findings also assist us with the kinds of expectations we can realistically place on the aging. In chapter five the unique contribution of theology was said to be its ability to call into question the assumptions underlying the value structure of the industrialized-technocratic society and its responsibility to assist with theological conceptions which lead to redemptive alternatives. In light of theology's unique contribution, it is our thesis that the church, whose task is to authenticate any viable theology, has a significant role in altering the historical circumstance in which the aged find themselves. It is the task before us now to explain the role of the church in implementing this change. The church must necessarily assume a major responsibility for implementing attitudinal and structural changes within the society since it is ultimately the one institution with access to the resources necessary to effect the needed change.

The first of these resources is its historical tradition of ministry to social problems. In the beginning of the church's history the church assigned a ministry of compassion to a group called deacons who were responsible for the social problems within the congregation. The apostles found that their primary work of teaching and preaching took a great deal of time. They found that they could not give adequate attention to their ministry to the needy. In this situation, they asked the members of the church to choose "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to carry out this ministry. These men were ordained by prayer and the laying on of hands.

Through the years, more and more work originally done by deacons has been assumed by volunteer agencies and governmental agencies. In recent years, it has been assumed that volunteer societies and civil governments would assume major responsibility for the welfare of the poor and misfortunate. Governmental and local volunteer agencies have extended the concept of care far beyond previous boundaries with admirable success. However, the result(s) of this approach has not been wholly satisfying. The systems which have been designed and developed to deliver the services generated with government programs have neglected a focus on an interpersonal caring relationship between worker and client. Furthermore, no theory for delivery of government services can demand the love of one's neighbor as can the gospel which calls the church into being.

Another important factor which can function as a resource is that the church as an institution does not owe its allegiance to the

industrialized-technocratic society as the source of its existence. It is assumed here that the institutions created in response to the industrialized value system owe an allegiance to that value system at some level of their existence. Although the case can be made for the church as it now exists playing a vital role in promoting and continuing that system, it is not the case that in its essence it is the product of that system. In line with the notion that theology calls the structures of society into question, the church in its essence is the vehicle by which the structures out of which we live are perpetuated and given a supportive setting. When the structures are in conflict with the redemptive spirit necessary to continue life for the whole of society, the church must challenge the lifestyles of individuals who adopt the conflicting values.

Still another resource is the recognition of the historical nature of the problem. It is precisely when the historical nature of the problem is recognized that hope of change emerges. By recognizing its historicity, one removes the problem from the context of necessity whether evolutionary or physiological. In essence it means that the problem does not have to remain the same, it can change--for better or for worse--but it can change.

This realization should influence not only the sense of urgency with which the church approaches the problem but also the attitudes of those who are directly involved with it. The timetable is now and the attitude is expectant hope. The timetable is now because the current isolation and despair experienced are the result

of a value system that is hostile to justice for segments of society, and it is by injustice that the aged live today. The attitude of expectant hope is tied to two factors. One is the existential necessity that the situation be changed. Two is the fact that in the next twenty-five years the sheer increase of the number of aged in the voting population can greatly influence the political scene.

If the church recognizes the historical nature of the problem, it will be concerned about the quality of life attendant on the change. The ferment for change appears evident, but change without regard to the theological task of questioning the assumptions by which we make change making decisions, fails to address the question of quality. Change which alters some conditions for the aged but not the assumption that the aged are "useless" has failed to grasp the significance of the current historical setting. The full significance is that the underlying assumptions out of which we live can be altered. This task is an appropriate role for the church.

In addition to recognizing its resources, the church needs to be aware of its role as transition agent. The reality facing the church is that the industrialized-technocratic value system has been adopted by most aged persons. Implicit in suggested alternatives or movements toward alternatives are emotional adjustments. Fear of the unknown, resistance to growth, ignorance of the emotional process experienced as change occurs, naive concepts of the dynamics of emotional and social change; all contribute to the sense of apathy and inertia witnessed in spite of current despair and loneliness.

Many aged persons are not aware of alternatives to their situation and therefore accept their situation as necessary. The personal reality of most aged persons is that alternate lifestyles pose a threat. They are not ready to experiment now. Though this resistance is more the result of their historical setting than the normal aging process it is nonetheless real to them. If alternative possibilities awaken their interest, it will be because a supportive setting, persuasively points toward hopeful possibilities.

Accepting persons while addressing destructive value orientations in their personality is a difficult task. People usually perceive conversations relating to value judgments as attacks on their personhood. On the level of person-to-person, such conversations are precisely that; for it is one person's set of values judging another's. Most therapeutic psychologies have neutralized this setting by adopting non-directive techniques which convey concerns but do not transgress another's willingness to open his/her value orientation to alternatives. If, however, the church applied psychology's stance to aged persons, it could be charged with negligence since very few aged persons would request help of this nature. Therefore, awareness of the question, "How do we alter value orientations without transgressing individual thresholds of resistance to change?" is central to any efforts on the part of the church to confront the current problem.

With this awareness in mind, the church has two approaches to the problem available to it. One is to effectively address the

practicalities of the situation and the other is to encourage exploration of expanded spiritual awareness.

In order to accomplish any change of the practical situation, the church must realize that it is imperative that it do well that which it does. The nature of a redemptive ministry demands this, and so also does the society in which we live. For the most part, it views agencies other than hospitals and schools which are related to the church with less than respect. Any program the church initiates in the area of aging must be realistic about its capacities and limits so that its quality is not shadowed by poor preparation. It is essential that in planning, the church initiate only those programs to which it can commit its energy on a long-term basis.

With this precaution in mind, a local church should consider the level of involvement to which it will commit itself. There is a cluster of activities possible around each of three possible levels of church involvement.

Level one is the vital and necessary function of referral. Referral requires very little in the way of funds, but it does require several persons who are committed to becoming informed on matters pertinent to the aged, find ways to get the information to the persons who need it, and take the additional step of tactfully assisting those who for any reason cannot make use of the information on their own after they receive it. The fulfillment of this level of commitment would require a task force of persons who would divide the tasks among themselves. One of them would become an expert on the area of social

security, another medicare, another would learn to interpret the income tax benefits for the aged, and so on.

The thrust of this level of involvement is the recognition that the church can and should become a clearing house for information about the services available for the aged. There are numerous federal, state and local government programs which are available to the aged at this moment. There are several community welfare agencies with services for the aged. Many people are not receiving these benefits simply because they do not know about them. At the very least we could see that the aged in our own congregation were made aware of the benefits available to them.

The second level of involvement requires use of present facilities. It can be referred to as the level of "limited services." It would also require some financial commitment on the part of the local church and a task force to determine the ways the existing building and grounds of the church could be utilized for meeting the needs of the aged in its community. There are probably times when the facility could be used as a drop-in center for informal or planned recreation. Very likely meals could be served on a weekly basis. A telephone could be provided for daily contact with those who request it. A room could be provided to house the Referral Service. The list is only limited by the imagination of those who are on the task force. The limitation is not the type of program but the funds and availability of the church building for the ideas that emerge.

At the third level of involvement the local church would

spearhead the development of a Multi-Service Center. A Multi-Service Center would be a comprehensively planned and coordinated program designed to address the current needs of the aged. Its goal would be to develop programs that would meet the full scope of the problems of the aged. It goes beyond the level of limited services in that it utilizes resources from the total community. If the current problem is to be met with any measure of solution, there must be broad community support. The focus of this type of support will be on leadership recruitment, raising general community awareness to the problem, and generating an attitude of supportive sensitivity on the part of the community as a whole. Beyond the achievement of these goals there must be an organized structure for institutionalizing the concern of the community. The local church can serve as the visionary leader for the realization of this center.

The preceding discussion was limited to ideas and programs which could be instituted without the assistance of the general community. The church could do them alone if necessary. If absolutely necessary, the church could develop the multi-service concept alone, but the better way would be to participate with the community-at-large. The reason is that the prevailing attitude toward the problem of the aged cannot be altered by one institution alone.

The multi-service center is designed to meet the needs of the aged with a multiple of services. It would give attention to developing appropriate programs in the following areas.

1. Medical Treatment

As we noticed in the second chapter, the aged are more susceptible to disease and illness. We know that there are a variety of reasons for this, but an approach which concentrates on prevention rather than treatment after the fact has not been adequately developed. Currently the high cost of medical care and the generally low income of the aged as a group makes adequate care prohibitive on an individual basis. There are group plans with a variety of insurance companies, but in their basic design they are not designed for preventive medical maintenance. Within the context of the multi-service center, the attention to medical service must be on the side of preventive medical attention. A plan must be developed that will give as much attention to avoiding illness and disease as to curing them when they occur. Possibly a contract with a clinic whose doctors are aware of the special needs of geriatric patients could be arranged. Those with diabetes, for example, would have a check-up on a regularly scheduled basis, much more frequent than those with no problems at all. Everyone, however, would have a routine check-up at least twice a year.

2. Nutrition

To tackle the nutritional problem among the aged we need a variety of approaches.

- a) A regular meal in a group setting at least once a week and preferably twice a week. It is imperative that there be a host or hostess at each of these meals to greet persons at

the door and to make them feel at home. It will not work otherwise.

- b) An organization such as Meals-on-Wheels to deliver meals to the home of those who are unable to cook for themselves, either permanently or temporarily.
- c) Workshops and/or classes for those who want to learn to cook well-balanced meals for one or two persons.
- d) The development of a food co-op which would buy in bulk the most used commodities and with volunteer help repackage so that those using the co-op could purchase what they needed at a price lower than is available to them in the stores. The co-op should focus particularly on high protein foods.
- e) Assuming the successful operation of the co-op, the basic organizational structure could be extended to the location of a plot of land (donated or bought) so that the co-operative effort could be extended to vegetables, poultry, eggs, and beef. Hours donated to the project would be credited with monetary value so that persons could earn part of their food.

By using this approach the multi-service concept would utilize not only methods of delivering better foods but also methods of making more food available at a cheaper rate. It would also use education to increase not only the awareness of how diet contributes to the health of a person but also to help persons recognize a well-balanced meal and to prepare food so that it does not lose its nutritional value.

3. Transportation

This is one of the major problems of the aged and can be attacked in a variety of ways.

- a) Lobbying for improved public transportation. This is a never-ending process in our current situation. Any progress in this area will aid not only the aged but the public in general.
- b) Monitoring the routing of present public transportation so that the needs of the aged in the community are served to the fullest extent possible under the current system.
- c) Initiating a volunteer program where housewives who shop on a weekly basis would volunteer to take an aged person with them on a designated morning or afternoon each week. This could be coordinated through volunteers and with some publicity it could involve a large number of the community.
- d) Use school buses during the periods that they are sitting idle. This would involve a legal battle and a redefining of the purpose of vehicles purchased with school money--though it is community money.
- e) An obvious but costly and hopefully a last resort, would be the purchase of the center's own vehicle. It may be necessary --but only as a last resort.

4. Housing

This is a very complex and difficult problem. It involves financing, maintenance, tax structures, and the housing market. Add

to these complicated items the person's emotional attachment to his or her house and the problem is intensified. The current trend is to build housing for the aged through government, church, or even private money. The net result of these efforts is a continuation of the process of pushing the aged into areas of uselessness by isolating them from the channels of community energy. This may not be intended, but the final result is the criterion by which we must judge. The focus of the multi-service center concept in the problem of housing must be toward keeping the aged in their own homes as long as possible. This assumes that persons who reach retirement have some form of housing. The question is how to assist them in continuing in an environment which is familiar and supportive.

The center should work for adequate tax adjustments for those who are living on social security. California currently has a tax assistance program for those over 62 which provides some help, but not at a level which makes a significant contribution to the living standard of the aged. The person who receives benefits from the government in the form of social security payments, in effect pays part of it back to the state in the form of taxes. A person who is on social security or some other form of pension should have a tax benefit which would enable him to live tax-free in a house up to \$30,000 valuation. Middle-income aged should not be removed from their housing because their income is suddenly decreased. Those who live in housing valued above \$30,000 should be taxed proportionately. This reduction should only be realized on housing in which the owner

lives. For those who are renting, a rent subsidy equal to the tax value should be available.

The main thrust of any effort for reform of the tax structures should be toward assisting the poor, without penalizing those who have gotten a little bit ahead. If anyone should bear an unequal burden, it should be those who have accumulated resources which enable them to participate lavishly in a lavish standard of living.

The ideas mentioned above would be only temporary measures and would not adequately address the problem of housing. This problem is not simply a problem for the aged but it is looming as a problem for the general society. The solution is certainly not that of merely building a house--just as the solution to the problems of the aged is not building more nursing homes or more communities for the aged. The situation calls for a radical departure from current trends. It is in this circumstance that the work of the architect Paolo Soleri is worth considering. Any serious multi-service approach will not be fully addressing the problem if it doesn't take seriously suggestions for housing that contribute to the solution of other problems of aging as well as housing. We should now consider the way in which Soleri's work should be treated in relation to the multi-service concept.

The potential achievement of the arcology as a viable option to the city holds great promise for the problem of aging. The most immediate problem which would be eliminated would be the transportation problem. There would be no need for automobiles in the arcology. The problem of isolation and loneliness would be greatly diminished.

These are the obvious problems that would be changed in the arcology.

Because of the hopeful potential provided by the vision of the arcology it would be important to incorporate awareness of what it is and what it could potentially become into the educational structure of the multi-service concept. A step beyond that would be the exposure of selected aged persons to the work that is being done at Arcosanti now. In addition to these gestures one would always be on the lookout for sources of money that would help the work that is presently being done, as well as sources of money that might be applied toward the building of a privately funded arcology. It is not that these ideas are feasible or practical, but it should be in the nature of the multi-service concept that it look beyond the immediate needs as well as attending to them.

5. Political Advocacy

Any organization which is seriously working to change the current circumstances of the aged must not only be aware of the legislation which affects the aged but be an active agent in the process which brings about better legislation. In the organizational structure one whole area of concern should be directed toward the role of political advocate for the aged. Under the responsibilities of this area should be the following:

- a) A unit of persons who are currently knowledgeable about the legislation that is in effect. Not only should they be knowledgeable about what is in effect, but they should also

be sensitive to the effect of that legislation so that needed adjustments can be ever before those who are associated with the organization.

- b) A unit of persons who are working to make the organization and the total community aware of the pending legislation. This unit should also be responsible for projecting the effect of the pending legislation as well as developing position papers to substantiate their claims. Beyond this effort they should also be alert to methods of influencing the vote on those pieces of legislation which are vital to the needs of the aged.
- c) A unit of people who are consistently working to write out new pieces of needed legislation. It is not enough to merely suggest to the staff of legislators that a piece of legislation is needed. We must participate in the agonizing effort which is necessary to the success of every piece of legislation which becomes an effective means of addressing the human problem to which it was intended to help. This effort would include the necessary research to substantiate the claims made in the proposal.

Three units of people have been proposed because the volume of material and background knowledge necessary to effect the political scene cannot be handled by a small group of people. Furthermore, the vast amount of material requires specialization if it is to be used effectively.

These are but a few ideas that may be helpful in meeting the

practical situation. If the church is to be really effective in this approach to the problem it must establish a partnership with government. The government has more money and some source of money is immediately needed to make an inroad into this field. The church has normally backed away from this kind of partnership, but basically any partnership is only as beneficial as the strength of both of the partners. The church should not be afraid of its role as partner. Rather than fearing that it will become corrupted by its involvement with government it needs to assert its capacity to influence as well as being influenced. It has assumed an inferior role too long and it is certain that the men of government have no more answers than the men of the church. It is also certain, as indicated before, that the structure of the church and its mission will generally lean toward more compassionate models than the structures that government yield.

At the same time that the church addresses the practical situation it must also encourage exploration of expanded spiritual awareness. This exploration is potentially the church's most important contribution to the solution of the problem. The aged in general trust the church more than any other institution. If any institution has the potential for stimulating interest in expanded spiritual awareness leading to alternative lifestyles, it is the church.

The essence of spirit in this context is the quality persons exhibit in their life drive. It is related to personality but it is to be differentiated from personality. It is the quality which allows a person to be aware of his personality, its effects on others, its

positive traits and the destructive traits contained within the framework of his personality, and still adapt whatever qualities inherent in the personality to a basically redemptive posture toward life. It is his spirit that redeems a potentially bad situation and makes it good for all concerned. That this happens is no accident. It is no accident that one person is able to apply a redemptive spirit to a particular situation. It is a decision. It is a decision in that moment but also a decision at some time in the past which has been acted upon often enough that the person has gained some level of ability in redeeming a situation. This is what is meant by a quality of spirit.

In relation to the aged the redemptive spirit would be able to face the situation in which he finds himself and find some creative way to escape the morass and despair which is so characteristic of many of the aged today. There are those who can do this, but it is the exception rather than the rule. It is the remarkable, or the outstanding person who is able to achieve this quality of spirit. But we are not so concerned with the exception as we are with the general situation and the question is how do we address the spiritual problems of the aged, how do we help them achieve a quality of spirit that is the norm rather than the exception? It is this task that is the task of the church if it is to address the spiritual problems of the aged.

It must be emphasized that to assume this responsibility does not mean that the church becomes a dispenser of ready-made answers. It is rather that the church provides the encouragement and the setting

within which persons who are aged can explore for the answers they need for themselves.

The distinctive claim of the church is that through its commitment to the message of Jesus and its acceptance of the Lordship of Christ it is called by God to be responsible to the spiritual climate in which it finds itself. As an institution it should question the underlying assumptions of the created order in which it exists and provide alternatives which redeem rather than destroy the created order when the created order is so unresponsive to the human spirit that it is repressive and destructive. As an aggregate of individual Christians who are not only shaped by the created order but also live and breathe by the underlying assumptions of that order, the Church should be a nurturing community which can find ways to free the human spirit from the womb of its first home and direct the energy of the freed spirit toward redemptive activity. This assumes the human spirit adopts the world-view of the culture into which it is first born. To be freed from that orientation the psyche must find freedom from the compulsiveness to justify oneself by the value system into which it was born. This freedom is generally found at that point that the psyche takes a "leap of faith" in the belief that there are transcendent spiritual values by which one can receive the experience of being justified, of being worthy, without the compulsive demand to conform to the value structures cherished by those who depend on the created order for their self-justification. For the Church it is Jesus the Christ who organized and shaped the perspective from which

Christians gain their understanding of what these spiritual values are and of the God who conforms a personal existence to these values throughout the universe. It is the awareness of these spiritual values and the resultant self-justification that comes in spite of the created order's value system that provides a basis of hope for all humanity including the aged. The primary task of the church is therefore twofold. It is to clarify and question the basic assumption of the created order and at the same time seek effective methods which nurture individual Christians in their quest for increased awareness.

"Increased Awareness" is a call of God to new possibilities but new possibilities are not always easily achieved. John Cobb has noted that "The call forward is toward intensified life, heightened consciousness, expanded freedom, more sensitive love, but the way lies through the valley of the shadow of death."¹ It is the "valley of the shadow of death" that turns most of us back from the experience of spiritual freedom. It is necessary to remind ourselves of this fact as we plan for work with the aged in the church and with a spirit of love for humanity as a whole adjust our plans accordingly.

The reality we face is that the level of spiritual awareness within the society is very low. Any serious attempt to expand spiritual awareness when one has learned to experience the world within the industrialized-technocratic society's system of values meets with resistance since one must approach what appears to be a

¹John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 56.

strange, alien and often threatening possibility. It is therefore important that this exploration take place in a trustful and supportive community. The growth group model appears to be the best resource for establishing this setting.

By using the growth group model and adding a goal orientation such as Bible study or a prayer period, an atmosphere can be developed where discussion of the need for spiritual awareness as well as sharing of new insights can be encouraged. A conscious attempt will be made to focus on God as that persuasive force which calls us forward rather than as the authoritarian enforcer of rules from past behavioral norms. It is in this setting that,

The believer in God so understood attends to the sensitization of his psychic life to the claim of new possibilities and of his neighbor rather than to inherited rules or religious feelings. In a community of faith he can improve his capacity to distinguish the call of God from the myriad other claims arising within and without. The relative weighing of the aspects of his experience is thus altered. One experiences guilt, not in the recognition that his acts are in conflict with past laws or socially approved patterns, but in the recognition that his bondage to the past and conformity to human expectations have inhibited his response to new possibilities of growth and service.²

The traditional resources of worship, prayer and meditation should continue to provide the primary means by which spiritual awareness is expanded. The focus of these activities needs to be upon the newness to which we are called and upon identifying the difference between creative guilt and repressive guilt. Ultimately it is the task of our growth toward Christian maturity to participate in having

²*Ibid.*, p. 62.

the patterns of emotional responses altered so that we are responding freely in love to the realities that confront us rather than responding out of learned responses which are founded more in the compulsive need to justify our existence in the created order. As these patterns of emotion are altered it is realistic to expect the situations out of which guilt arises to change also.

In regard to worship, work is the order of the day--work in the sense that we consciously make the effort to become aware of the spiritual dimension of our existence. To do this we must do more than talk about it. We must start the search wherever we are with whatever level of sophistication we have attained or whatever theological position we have been molded by. To do this we begin a program of worship and devotions which still encourage everyone in the congregation to participate in a program of spiritual exercises. The model suggested for this program is the worship of the community at Taizé in France. There they have worship three times a day. Silence is an important part of each service. Music is also an important part so that the setting would most likely be the center for the congregation --the sanctuary. The liturgy also includes prayers and sometimes a brief meditation.

The chief advantage to using the Taizé model is that it is established. It provides a starting point from which the individual moods and interests of the people involved can expand. The prayers for a given service could be written by a designated person or any person who volunteered for the assignment. The music can be adapted

to the setting of the group involved. Any of a number of variations are possible while the group establishes its own worship identity. It may eventually move away from the Taizé liturgy entirely, but at least the Taizé approach is a proven worshipful experience which provides a meaningful experience for a broad variety of people.

Regardless of the approach one uses it seems that initially the approach of necessity needs to be strenuous in the number of times it is provided. We have tailored the worship experience to the convenience of the modern-day pace of living but this is not adequate for those who should expand their awareness of the spiritual dimension of life. The church can encourage the establishment of the kind of discipline that is necessary for this search by making the possibility of corporate worship available three times a day. This sounds impossible, I know, but the strength of the experience will carry its own method of convincing people of its validity and slowly the idea will catch on. The challenge would be to maintain a vital relation between these periods of corporate worship and the goal of the entire venture.

In regard to prayer and meditation, it seems that it would be necessary to assist these very private modes of expanding spiritual awareness with some structure and direction. The structure would function as an enabler. It would enable persons whose whole life had been without this kind of discipline to find the encouragement needed to become a person whose life is imbued with the benefits of prayer and meditation. The direction would give a sense of orientation. It would be provided in a setting where people were willing to talk about

their prayer life and reflect on the nature of their prayer requests through discussion. The idea is that persons would not simply be left alone to discover their own pace with prayer and meditation but would be provided with encouragement and assistance.

The goal of this effort toward expanding one's spiritual awareness of participating in the new asceticism is the reestablishment of wisdom as a quality to be achieved by the aged. If the aged could recover an arena in life which essentially was available only to them from which a sense of pride and achievement was generated, then the recovery of self-respect for the aged could become a reality rather than a theory. The historical survey and the gerontological research both support the notion that this could be a possibility. Erik Erikson's work on the life cycle would also support this notion. A quote from Erikson's work pertinent to this idea was used in the preceding chapter. It indicated that each generation must find from the wisdom of the ages its own form of wisdom. This is the strength of the aged, and he goes on to say that, "Wisdom, then, is detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself."³ From this definition it would seem that the achievement of this kind of wisdom is that arena available to the aged and it should be a conscious goal of the efforts toward expanded spiritual awareness.

The urgency for the church to find an effective way to increase the level of spiritual awareness and support the achievement

³Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 133.

of wisdom is great. If it fails to attend to this task it has failed its calling to be the church. But at the same time the depressing nature of the current situation demands a ministry which accomplishes a practical exegesis of the increased spiritual awareness. It is at this point that the Church becomes a responsible agent for the claims it makes for its existence within the society. The secularization of society places an added burden on the Church. It must now give evidence of its ability to implement its message as well as talk about it.

This proposal ultimately is dependent on the love and commitment of those persons involved in working with the aged. It is not because people in the church are better but because the eternal persuasive call for people to have concern for others is recognized there and maintains an aura of hope around the church for effecting change. It is the God who continually calls us to new redemptive possibilities known to us in Jesus Christ, who nurtures and urges us despite our unworthiness and in spite of the historically created order which denies realization of Her nature. It is ultimately the communication of this reality; the loving, graceful nature of reality, through any and all efforts generated within the church which is the hope for changing the current historical situation of the aged. Expanded spiritual awareness and a new emergence of Wisdom as a valued mode of realizing self-respect are necessary evidence that this love is being communicated. As this begins to occur the created order will once again regain some balance, the list of the ship will be corrected, and the aged will participate with the rest of creation in that adventure of life which holds possibilities for mankind of which

we are not aware at this time. It is theology's obligation to point to the factors that cause the ship to list and the church's obligation to work toward correcting those factors.

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